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Caroling Through Christmas



*Gladness and joy were the inspirations for
old-time caroling customs, writes Margaret Boeye*

SHEPHERDS ON a green hillside, watching their flocks at night, were startled by these words—

"Glory to God in the Highest

And on earth, peace and good will toward men."

It was the first Christmas carol. Sung by an Angel Host on the eve of Christ's birth, this phrase has been echoed in different songs around the world through past centuries.

For almost a thousand years men knew Christmas without carols. With singing of hymns and long church services, Christmas was a solemn affair. About 1223, Saint Francis of Assisi, the great mystic of the Middle Ages, placed the first Christmas cradle in his parish church at Graecia, Italy. To accompany this nativity scene he desired gay music. Although it is doubted that Saint Francis himself wrote any carols, he is known as the father of the carol. Sung first as interludes in church services, carols soon became a recognized part of every service. Strains of the carol floated from Italy to Spain to France to Germany and finally to England.

The word carol is derived from the Italian word "carolare", meaning to sing. Formerly it was customary to accompany carols, sung to popular dance tunes, by a dance. At first they were frowned upon by the Church, which favored the more solemn and stately church hymns, and carols were excluded from the worship until the time of Saint Francis.

The earliest known copy of an English carol is a fragment published by Ritson about 1410 A. D. The word "carol" was first found in the Anglo-Norman dialect of the 12th century.

Among the multitudes of Christmas carols loved by all man-kind, the best known is "O Come All Ye Faithful." Although the exact source of this Latin hymn is uncertain, there is quite definite proof that it originated in France about 1700. In many churches today, as in the past, this song has been used as a processional hymn. The most internationally popular Christmas song, it has been translated into 119 different languages and dialects.

"The First Noel" originated during the 16th century and is claimed by both England and France. The word "noel" is derived from the Latin word "natalis", meaning birth. It is a true folk song and, like the tones of an old violin, it seems more beautiful each succeeding Christmas.

Loved by children and adults is the beautiful and peaceful "Silent Night." It was Christmas Eve in the year 1818 when the organ in the church of St. Nicholas at Oberndorf, Bavaria, refused to utter a sound. It had been in need of repairs but no one had seen to it, for the small town was snowbound, and there was no way of getting help. Joseph Mohr, the vicar, realized the need of special music to take the place of the organ. With children especially in mind he sat down and wrote the verses of "Silent Night". Franz Gruber, the organist, composed the melody. It was presented at the midnight mass.

All carols have different thoughts. In an Andalusian carol the "rascally gypsies" have stolen the swaddling

clothes and have not left the child a single rag. In a Spanish carol the gypsies at the town gate welcomed the three kings with a dance. A Provencal carol claims that the Magi-kings are themselves gypsies, who read the lines on the hands of the Child, of Mary and of Joseph and predicted the several destinies. In an Italian carol a gypsy woman offers hospitality to the Holy Family during their retreat to Egypt.

"We Three Kings of Orient Are" tells the journey of the three kings, Melchior, Caspar and Balthazar. Melchior, a small man and the king of Nubia, brought a gift of gold representing Christ's royalty. Caspar, a man of medium build and king of Chaldea, brought the Christ Child frank-incense representing Christ's divinity. Balthazar was a tall black-skinned man and king of Tarskish. He brought the Babe myrrh for Christ's suffering. The black king proved that Christ is limited by neither national boundaries nor by race. The hymn was composed by the Rev. John Henry Hopkins, Jr., rector of Christ's Church at Williamsport. No mention of names or number or royalty of the magi is in Matthew.

Martin Luther composed "From Heaven Above" on a Christmas Eve in 1534 as he was rocking his small child to sleep. Looking at his child, he dreamed of the Baby Christ. He took down his lute, played a beloved folk song and wrote 15 verses for children, and thus another Christmas song was born.

Phillips Brook, a young rector in Philadelphia, took a trip to Palestine, where on Christmas Eve he was out on the hills. The quiet night, starlight and Christmas spirit filled his soul. Slowly he climbed to the top and, beholding the Holy City nestled among the hills, was inspired to write, for the children of his Sunday School, the words:

O little town of Bethlehem
How still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by.
Yet in the dark street shineth
The everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.

Lewis Redner, organist of the Holy Trinity church, promised to write the tune. On a late Saturday night, having no inspiration, he went to bed. During his sleep he was awakened by an "angel strain". Reaching for paper and pencil, he wrote down the notes, and the song was played the following morning at church.

Caroling extended from the singing in church. If the audience approved of the songs, the singers would go out into the street still singing. By the 15th century caroling was fairly well established. It displaced was-sailing in the British Isles which was a custom of offering hot drinks from the Wassail Bowl in exchange for a song. In England carol singing begins right after dinner and lasts until late in the evening.

The true carol is not the product of an age of cold historic criticism; it belongs to an age of faith. Man's songs are never sweeter than those which flow from the heart at Christmas.